https://bruceslawter.com/2015/05/25/visit-to-torgau-the-meeting-of-u-s-and-soviet-forces-on-the-elbe-river-in-1945/

America's "Aprils of the Fives" and the End of World War II in Europe

Posted on May 25, 2015 by Bruce Slawter

First posted in May *2015,* during commemorations marking the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII in the European Theater, this blog essay features first-hand accounts from veterans and family members of the "greatest generation" who participated in the historic events, most notably the link-up between U.S. and Soviet forces on the Elbe River near a charming Medieval German town called Torgau. The piece also includes my thoughts about my closest relatives, who fought in in the Pacific Theater, plus an aside about my own brief experience in another conflict several decades later.

The concept of "patriotism" is often hard to define; and most service men and women do not consider themselves to be more worthy patriots than any other U.S. citizen. Still, I hope that this piece will convey some sense of what it means to be an American, either in a combat zone or busy on the home front, who experiences war close up. . . and of our pride for having served the greatest country that has ever been.

After reading the essay, you are invited to visit a photo album featuring photos of the veterans who returned to the Elbe River for a reunion back in 2015 by clicking on the link located at the very bottom of this page.

Warmest regards,

Bruce D. Slawter

Colonel, USAF (Ret.)

September 2, 2020

America's "Aprils of the Fives" and the End of World War II in Europe

May 2015

Every history buff carries in his hip pocket a list of important dates in American history – or even what he considers to be a particularly noteworthy month. For me, the month that holds the most significance will always be April . . . not every April . . . just the "Aprils of the Fives" – those Aprils running from 1775 to 1975, for which the accompanying year ends with the digit "5."

One might ask, "O.K., how did you come up with this *Fibonacci*-like formulation of *America's Aprils of the Fives*? What's the big deal?" I'll try to explain.

* * * * *

Recent Posts

- Joseph Biden's War: The President Refuses to Negotiate an End to the Carnage in Ukraine; It's Now Up to Congress to Jump-Start the Peace Process by Taking a Radical First Step
- Slouching Towards Armageddon: How Diplomatic Malfeasance Rendered the U.S. Incapable of Preventing the Ukraine War . . . and Now of Ending It
- Perspective and Peace
- The Most Valuable Bible in the World
- Dance of the Desert: Masada and the Amazing Archaeological Expedition of 2020
- Alpine Adventures – 2021
- Elisha and the Chariots of Fire
- Kipling's Lament
- Alpine Dreamin': Chamonix and Mont Blanc, France
- "You Die, I Fly": My Brief Encounter with George H.W. Bush
- The King James Bible Translators and "The Overthrow of Stage-Playes"
- The Bard and the Man of La Mancha: Inventors of

Earlier this month (May 2015), millions across the globe commemorated the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in the European Theater. On Friday, May 8th, thousands of Americans and Europeans – along with the rapidly diminishing numbers of veterans of that terrible conflict – attended events marking the surrender of Nazi Germany and the end of Europe's most devastating war. In nearby Washington, D.C., the ever security-conscious FAA even permitted an aerial parade of 56 WWII fighters and bombers over the Mall near the Washington Monument and down the Potomac. And on Saturday, May 9th, the Russians and the other nationalities of the post-Soviet states staged huge parades and solemn ceremonies marking their victory over Fascist Germany. (They do it on the 9th of May of each year, because the final German instrument of surrender wasn't actually signed until after midnight, Moscow-time.)

While the importance of this month's commemorative events cannot be overstated, it's interesting to note that the war for most American GIs serving in Europe effectively ended on April 25, 1945, when the lead elements of the U.S. Army's 69th Infantry Division, having just defeated stubborn German resistance in the nearby city of Leipzig, linked up with the USSR's 58th Guards Division at various points along the Elbe River. Centered on the picturesque town of Torgau in the German state of Saxony (situated within the Moscow-dominated German Democratic Republic throughout the Cold War), this historic 40 kilometer-long bridge-head, which linked U.S. and Soviet forces during the last weeks of the war, effectively sliced the remnants of the Third Reich into two parts. Moreover, it sealed the ring of Allied forces closing in on Berlin.

More soldiers would die before the official surrender of Nazi Germany would take place on the evening of May 8/9 – mainly Soviets. Relatively few Americans would lose their lives after the link up on the Elbe – thanks to the good sense of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who acquiesced to the Soviets in their expectation that the honor of storming Berlin go to them. Eisenhower also realized that, in accordance with the London Protocols signed in the fall of 1944, which specified the zones of occupation after Germany's defeat, he would be compelled to cede back to the Soviets most of the territory that U.S. and British forces would have had to fight across in order to reach Berlin. Nevertheless, Hitler would commit suicide five days after the historic meeting of Allied forces on the Elbe; and the Nazi capital would capitulate after only seven more days of resistance.

Several years earlier, in a speech given after the *Battle of El Alamein* in November 1942, Winston Churchill cautioned the Allies that this early British victory in the Egyptian desert was " . . . not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning." During the decades after the end of World War II, veterans of the famed 69th Infantry Division and their children would fight over bragging rights as to which small group of American soldiers was the first to make contact with the Soviets along the Elbe – and the debate is still not settled. However, back then on the evening of April 25, 1945, as word about the link-up spread throughout the 69th like wildfire, every "grunt" could agree that the surrender of Nazi Germany was close at hand. Members of the division had been in a state of near-continuous combat since the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944; and most soldiers were bone-tired of the futile but still deadly German resistance. However, as U.S. soldiers became aware of the link-up with the Soviets, morale shot up to Alpine heights. Each battle-weary G.I. in the 69th – from the top of his unshaven head down to his mud-caked boots – believed that he had actually made it through the terrible furnace of war. He knew that, not only was this *the beginning of the end*, it was indeed *the end of the end;* and soon, he would be heading home.

* * * * *

I have always believed that the "Spirit of the Elbe" fostered by American and Soviet soldiers back in April 1945 was the penultimate example of what could be achieved when Americans focused on "converging interests" rather than divergent political differences.

While I always possessed an understanding of the broad contours of the U.S. and Soviet campaigns in the European Theater, I had never visited the area of the historic conversion of forces, nor had I ever met any of the participants. Last month's 70th Anniversary of "Elbe Day" (as it has been called in east Germany for decades) appeared to be the last opportunity I would have to visit the actual scenes of these initial meetings and talk with the last surviving veterans who participated in the operation. Thanks to the gracious efforts of Tom Slopek, the President of the 69th Infantry Division's "Next Generation Group" (whose principal members include the sons and daughters of the GIs who have since passed), my wife and I made the pilgrimage to Torgau in April and were included in the handful of American representatives attending this solemn but upbeat 70th Anniversary of the end of the war Europe.

* * * * *

In retrospect, I suppose that I had mixed motives for attending this year's event. As a long-time student of Russian military history, I of course had a particular interest in the subject matter; moreover, I felt that I needed

- La Mancha: Inventors of the Modern Imagination
- Everything is Normal: Oh, the Joys of Traveling in Russia!
- Walking on the Moon. . . in Your Skivvies
- America's "Aprils of the Fives" and the End of World War II in Europe

Russian military history, I of course had a particular interest in the subject matter, however, I felt that I needed to honor both the American GIs and their Soviet counterparts who served and bled in Europe. However, deep down, I suppose that I traveled to Torgau to honor my own family members as well – those members of "the Greatest Generation," who served in other theaters of the war and on the home front, and who have long since passed on.

Two of my closest male relatives saw the horrors of war up close. My father, Sgt Bernard Slawter of the U.S. Army's 23rd Infantry Division (known as the *Americal Division,* because it was formed on the island of New Caledonia in the South Pacific), survived the conflict; but he was severely wounded in early 1945 and initially left for dead on a lonely battlefield in the Philippines. When mortuary crews were about to bag up his unconscious body, they noticed that a large chunk of shrapnel intended for his heart had been lodged in the torn remains of his breast-pocket Bible. My closest uncle, Sgt Claud Lewis, was a member of an elite U.S. Marine commando squad. Having just been awarded the Bronze Star for heroism on Iwo Jima, Uncle Claud was busy rooting out suicidal Japanese soldiers savagely defending their fortified caves on Okinawa, just as the war in Europe was winding down along the Elbe. Both men bore the physical and mental scars of that war throughout the rest of their lives.

Given the complexities of the Pacific Theater during World War II and current regional political sensitivities, I felt that there was little likelihood that a similar commemoration would be held on the obscure battlefields where my father and uncle fought and bled. So I held one for them privately at Torgau.

Lastly, I thought that I would also go to the now serene countryside of Saxony and Brandenburg to honor my late mother, Bernice Lewis Slawter, a Boeing riveter and descendant of a grandmother who was born in a village located just to the east of Torgau. Mom's job was attaching tail sections to B-17 bombers in Washington state, before the aircraft were flown to Europe; and she performed this task with her usual Teutonic dedication and attention to detail. She rightly believed that she also had a hand in winning the war against the Axis.

* * * * *

We met a number of outstanding people during our visit to Torgau – and they all had fascinating stories to tell. Accomplished men and women in their own right, these folks are doing their best to preserve the "Spirit of the Elbe" and to honor the contributions of the wartime veterans.

First and foremost among the superstars we met in Torgau was Chester A. Yastrzemski, the sole American veteran of the 69th Infantry Division able to make this year's trek to Germany. An active 89-year-young ex-baseball player (like his hall-of-fame nephew Carl Yastrzemski), "Chet" eventually went into law-enforcement after playing semi-pro baseball; and he retired a few years back as the Police Chief of Southampton Village on Long Island. Chet was only 18 when first went into combat. With his characteristic straight-forward frankness, Chet told me that, as a young army private, he was just doing his best to follow orders. "The officers had all the maps," he said. "The battle lines were a bit confused." He said that he never knew his exact location, until his unit ran into the Red Army. A modest man, I'm sure Chet did much more than he let on. We'll have to pry some more stories out of him on another, less emotional occasion.

Next on the list of notables was Tom Slopek, the aforementioned President of the 69th's Next Generation Group. A Ford Motor Company Executive and Engineer from Akron, Ohio, Tom is doing a terrific job preserving the heritage of the 69th through the children of the original veterans of the unit. Tom's father was a member of a tank destroyer battalion, when American soldiers made contact with the Soviets near the medieval town of Torgau. According to Tom, this initial "meeting" wasn't particularly friendly, because the Soviets were too busy lobbing artillery rounds from the other side of the river into the quaint walled town to notice that U.S. soldiers had just entered it. Realizing that the shelling was being conducted by their Soviet "allies" and not by the Germans, fast-thinking GIs searched the town for some linen and eventually found some iodine in a local apothecary with which to fashion a large U.S. flag. The Soviets only stopped their shelling when the GIs managed to scramble up the highest turret of the castle and drape the makeshift "Stars and Stripes" over the walls.

Ted Agne, president of The Communications Strategy Group, Inc., of Marblehead, Massachusetts, also traveled to Torgau with his wife Paulette to represent his father, a rifleman in the 273rd Regiment of the 69th Infantry Division, the unit that sent out three separate patrols on the 25th of April to probe for German resistance and find the Soviets. Among his many interests, Ted is a fellow admirer of Winston Churchill. Working with Churchill's granddaughter Celia Sandys, Ted was the principal American fundraiser for the WWII museum in Whitehall, London, known as the "Churchill War Rooms."

During our visit to Torgau, Suzanne and I also had the pleasure of meeting American screenwriter and

During our visit to Torgau, Suzanne and I also had the pleasure of meeting American screenwriter and filmmaker Nancy Ruff. Nancy's father was the driver for First Lieutenant Albert Kotzebue, whose American patrol near the town of Strehla (located about 30 kilometers southeast of Torgau) was cited in U.S. Army reports as the first unit to make contact with the Soviets. Nancy's late father was the first U.S. soldier to shoot up a green flare into the sky over the Elbe, as a pre-arranged signal to the Soviets that the Americans had arrived. Nancy hopes to retrace her father's wartime movements across Europe and to make a documentary about it. Having a rent-a-car at our disposal, and Nancy arriving in Torgau by train, Suzanne and I took the opportunity of driving her down to Strehla to experience the very spot on the Elbe where her father sent up the green flare, and where his patrol commandeered a wooden skiff and paddled across the river with the butts of their riffles to greet the Soviets. Tom Slopek performed faithful service as our guide, showing us the location where Nancy's father launched the flare and crossed the river. Tom also found the small village museum where we could see the famous little boat that the soldiers used in crossing the Elbe.

Key to the success of the relatively small American participation in the 70th anniversary – a festive occasion overwhelmed by Russian, Ukrainian, Kazakhstani, and German participants – was Marian Wendt, a Member of the *Bundestag* (German Parliament), who was elected from the town of Torgau. Barely 30 years old and yet the equivalent of an American congressman, Marian is a major advocate for a strong trans-Atlantic alliance; moreover, he is an essential supporter of the efforts of the 69th Next Generation Group to preserve the Spirit of the Elbe and the memory of the U.S. soldiers who fought to liberate his county from the Nazi regime. A busy man dealing with thorny emigration and national security issues back in Berlin, Marian graciously took the time to chauffeur our small group of Americans to several historical venues around the town. The Americans joked, "What's wrong with this picture?"

While there were hundreds of post-Soviet nationals at this year's event, a good number were re-enactors wearing WWII-style uniforms, who were there just for the fun; and others were academics or nonprofit reps, each with his own agenda. However, there were also several Soviet veterans and currently serving officers from the former Soviet states in attendance. Just like the Americans, these individuals came solely to commemorate the event and honor those who served.

The ranking Russian general in attendance was the commander of DOSAAF, a quasi-military organization from the old Soviet period, whose function is to train "weekend warriors," who might someday be called to serve in the Russian armed forces. Long considered a "club" for such military sports as skydiving and marksmanship, think "Sea Scouts Meet Rambo," and you'll get the picture about what this organization is all about. Lower-ranking active duty military personnel from Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan were also in attendance.

Perhaps the most enthusiastic and numerous group in Torgau for the festivities were everyday German citizens. The pastor of the Protestant church in Torgau, where Martin Luther gave one of his very first sermons during the Reformation, presented the benediction; and local schoolchildren serenaded the large crowd with several sweet-sounding songs that they had learned for the occasion.

Due to U.S. differences with Mr. Putin over his invasion of Ukraine, official U.S. government presence was kept to a minimum. The senior U.S. official in attendance was the U.S. ambassador in Berlin, John Emerson. The highest-ranking U.S. military officer was a colonel, the army attaché; and he was supported by a small color guard. While I was glad to see the ambassador and the handful of U.S. soldiers in uniform, I thought to myself that the U.S. government could have used this opportunity to mend some fences if it had provided more senior diplomatic and military representation.

As is the case with American GIs from that era, the number of living Soviet WWII veterans able to attend such commemorative events is rapidly diminishing. I found just three former Soviet soldiers who were anywhere near the front at the time of the historic link up. The Soviet counterpart to American Chet Yastrzemski during most of the ceremonial events was one Nikolai Mikhailovich Belyaev, who is featured in the photo standing next to Chet. I asked Nikolai Mikhailovich why he was wearing a black uniform of a Navy Commander. He said that, after taking part in the storming of the Reichstag in Berlin, he was offered an appointment to one of the naval academies; and he decided to make a career of the Soviet Navy after the war.

Another terrific person that I met at Torgau – and perhaps the one with the most interesting family story – was Jeff Thau, a fellow retired U.S. Air Force colonel, now living in Dayton, Ohio. Jeff's father, Chaim Thau, was also a participant at the famous meeting on the Elbe. He is even featured in the iconic photograph often seen in the history books (which was actually staged for the press, the day after the first actual series of contacts took place). However, in this famous photo, Jeff's father is not wearing an American uniform but a Soviet one.

Chaim Thau, you see, was a Polish Jew; and he fought in the Polish resistance against the Nazis after the

Wehrmacht overran his country in 1941. Later in the war, when the Soviets retook parts of Poland and captured Thau, they were about to execute him (as they routinely did with most Polish partisans). However, the Soviets soon discovered that Thau was not only fluent in Polish, but in Russian and in German as well. Accepting an offer he couldn't refuse, Thau was given a Soviet uniform and served as the unit's interpreter for the remainder of the war. Given his instincts for survival, Thau was obviously a resourceful individual. Making his way to the West after the war, Thau eventually emigrated to the United States, where he became a U.S. citizen and raised a family. As I compared notes with Jeff Thau (Chaim's U.S.-born son), we realized that we both had served at the same U.S. Air Force base in southern California during the 1980s.

During our visit to Torgau, I also learned of the unusual story of Joseph Polowsky, a veteran of the 69th Infantry Division, who is the sole American veteran buried in the local cemetery. A member of Lt. Kotzebue's patrol when it linked up with the Soviets at Strehla, Joe would survive the war. However, his life as a civilian would become a controversial footnote in the history of the Cold War, as Joe would enthusiastically embrace the "Spirit of the Elbe" as a clarion call for "world disarmament." Falling under the scrutiny of Senator Joe McCarthy for "Un-American Activities," Polowsky was eventually befriended by Nikita Khrushchev and GDR leader Walter Ulbricht, who cynically used his idealism as grist for Moscow's propaganda mill. However, Polowsky would remain true to his vision of world peace. After he died in 1983, at his request, the troubled anti-war activist was buried in his beloved Torgau. Polowsky was further honored when the local gymnasium (high school) was named after him. Among the small group of Americans visiting the cemetery was Polowsky's son (also named "Joe"), who had never known his father and was visiting Torgau for the first time.

After paying our respects to Joe Polowsky, we then wandered over to a section of the cemetery where several dozen wooden crosses marked the resting places of some of the last German soldiers to die in the war. Most were killed resisting the pincer movements made by U.S. and Soviet forces converging on Torgau. We were accompanied on our stroll by an elderly German. He said that he had been forced to fight in the German army at the age of 15, as youngsters and pensioners were hastily rounded up, issued weapons and uniforms, and sent into the fray. As we walked through this sad section of the cemetery, someone pointed out a marker for a particularly young German soldier. The inscription on the cross indicated that he was a line "rifleman," and that he had died on April 25, 1945 – in effect the last day of the war for any combatant fighting in that part of Germany.

The German soldier, Private Joachim Wesner, had not yet reached his 12th birthday.

* * * * *

So the end of WWII in Europe in April 1945 was perhaps one of the most salient examples of this concept of "America's Aprils of the Fives." What other noteworthy events in American military history also took place during an "April xxx5"? Several come to mind:

First, every schoolchild knows about *Paul Revere's Ride*; and many Americans can recite the fact that "The Shot Heard 'Round the World," which launched American colonists into their long War for Independence, occurred in April 1775, at Lexington and Concord (take you pick).

Not every American Patriot back in the early years of the Revolution had been inspired by (or even read) *Cicero* or the writers of the enlightenment, as it is often suggested in the textbooks. American rebels, however, were all deeply conscious of their heritage as free Englishmen – loyal subjects of a legally constrained monarch, whose forefathers, during the English Civil Wars and the Glorious Revolution of the previous century, had achieved a form of limited self-government and legislative representation. Few American citizen-soldiers were inspired by lofty philosophical ideals – at least at first. However, every farmer, lawyer, and store clerk who took part in this initial action in April 1775 was motivated by the conviction that he could not permit the actions of a tone-deaf government located in a distant capital to roll back those laws that guarded his freedom and protected his independence.

Next on the list of notable "Aprils of the Fives" is the end of the American Civil War and the assassination of our most revered president, Abraham Lincoln, both occurring in April 1865. Those of us who have been participating in the Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War here in the "Old Dominion" are conscious of the fact that the surrender of General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia to General Ulysses S. Grant's forces took place in an idyllic little village located in south-central Virginia, called Appomattox Courthouse. Several days later (also in April 1865), Confederate General Joe Johnston surrendered another sizable Southern army to William Tecumseh Sherman in North Carolina. Sporadic fighting would continue for several more weeks. The very last land battle of the war was the Confederate victory at Palmito Ranch in Texas, occurring on May 13, 1865, after the failure of a truce brokered by Union General Lew Wallace (the future

author of *Ben Hur*) and Confederate General James E. Slaughter (possibly a distant ancestor). However, for all intents and purposes, the American Civil War came to a close in April 1865.

Lincoln's "Let 'Em Up Easy" policy and the magnanimous terms of surrender offered by Grant to the defeated Southern armies in April 1865 facilitated the relatively peaceful reconciliation between North and South. Some historians would argue that the Lincoln-Grant formula for managing the surrender of those Southern forces remaining in the field had prevented years of guerilla warfare on the part of hard-core Confederates, who otherwise might never have laid down their arms. While post-war reconstruction of the South would prove extremely difficult — and African Americans would suffer dearly for this for many decades to come — the end of the organized fighting bought time for the nation to pass the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, which established the legal framework for furthering Lincoln's vision for formerly enslaved Americans.

Returning to the European Theater during World War II, it's important to remember that it was in April 1945 when the U.S. army "liberated" the huge German concentration camp at Buchenwald. While intrepid Jews, working with underground networks, had been passing information to the Allies about what was going on in the camps for several years, it wasn't until Buchenwald was opened for shocking visitation by battle-hardened GIs and the international press that the world would learn about the full extent of the Nazi atrocities committed against the Jews, Gypsies, Slavs, and homosexuals of Europe.

It was also in the early part of April 1945 when U.S. forces landed on the island of Okinawa and thus initiated the last battle of World War II. Lasting for three more months, the horrific fighting on Okinawa would become the bloodiest battle ever fought in the Pacific. U.S. forces would incur 82,000 casualties, including over 12,000 battle deaths. The Japanese would lose over 100,000 soldiers in battle deaths, mainly because they refused to surrender. Between 30,000 and 100,000 civilians would also die on Okinawa – many by committing suicide at the urging of the Japanese propaganda machine.

* * * * *

The last of the *Aprils of the Fives* on my list of historic happenings marks the end of the Vietnam War, which occurred on April 30, 1975, with the fall of Saigon. This event holds particular significance for several million Americans who served during that time frame, including this writer.

58,000 Americans had died by the time that U.S. military involvement officially ended in Vietnam on August 15, 1973. The U.S. withdrawal was completed seven months after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords. In the agreement, the parties agreed to a cease fire, the return of POWs, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South, and a peaceful political process – including free elections – whereby the South Vietnamese would be able to determine their own political future. It would not take long before the North Vietnamese began violating this agreement.

President Richard Nixon provided guarantees to the leaders of South Vietnam that the U.S. would come to their aid with American air power if the North violated the accords. However, shortly after the last U.S. soldiers had departed in the summer of 1973, the North Vietnamese started moving forces south of the demilitarized zone; and within the year, Nixon had resigned as president, because of Watergate. Newly installed President Gerald Ford, with no Congressional support whatsoever for U.S. re-engagement in Vietnam, could do nothing but watch the North Vietnamese gradually tighten the noose around the South. The final battle in Vietnam would take place as North Vietnamese forces completed their encirclement of the Republic of Vietnam's capital city of Saigon, in April 1975.

I was a newly minted C-141 *Starlifter* copilot at the time. One morning, sitting in the cockpit of our long-range jet transport at Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, the pilot and I were just about to start our engines for our flight to Hawaii and then to California. The Command Post radioed that we needed to re-file our flight plan, as we were now heading to Saigon's Tan Son Nhut Airport. A large C-5 Galaxy carrying a group of orphans for adoption in the U.S. had crash-landed several days earlier. We were flying to Saigon in order to evacuate the survivors.

What we didn't know at the time was that "Operation Baby Lift" – while it involved at least some orphans – was also President Ford's pretext for quietly beginning the full-scale evacuation of Americans and allies (including key South Vietnamese personnel), before they were captured by the Communist North Vietnamese. Our aircrew was one of the first to be used in this sustained effort.

Events moved rapidly. Just as we had taken off from Saigon with our first load of evacuees for our flight to Clark Air Base in the Philippines later that evening, we learned that President Ford had announced that a maximum effort would be made by all available U.S. fixed-winged transport in the Pacific to evacuate as many Americans and Vietnamese as possible.

Our relatively brief eight-day cargo mission from California to Japan would turn into a month-long deployment to Southeast Asia and the Pacific. My aircrew would fly a total of six round-trip missions into Saigon as North Vietnamese forces closed in on the kill, and we evacuated over 1,000 American and Vietnamese civilians. During most of the flights, we had to use tie-down straps to secure the mass of passengers to the bare cargo floor. Several days before the fall of Saigon on April 30, as the runway became too chewed up by artillery rounds to land safely, our mission changed from emergency extraction of civilians from war-torn Saigon to transporting refugees from the Philippines to relocation centers situated throughout the Pacific.

I was a fairly naive "brown-bar," at the time. Like Chet Yastrzemski fighting with the 69th Infantry Division in Germany during WWII, I was just following orders. I was trying my best not to screw up.

The complete narrative of the fixed-wing airlift portion of the evacuation of Saigon in April 1975 needs to be told – but let's save that for another occasion. (See the blog post, *Walking on the Moon . . . in Your Skivvies*, for details about my one combat "screw-up.")

* * * * *

After attending this year's Elbe Day events in Torgau, my wife and I eventually made our way to Dresden, from where we took a two-hour train ride to Prague. Our second-class compartment companions included a very friendly German family from Hamburg. They were dressed in the jerseys of the German national hockey champions; and they were headed to Prague to cheer on their team during the international playoffs.

After exchanging the usual pleasantries and joking about who would win the hockey tournament, the father of this very amicable German family said that, yes, he knew Americans quite well. He had been to our shores several times. In fact, just last month, he had taken his family to Disney World and to the Gulf Coast of Florida . . . *to ride the dolphins.* His wife, with her eight-year old son asleep in her lap chimed in: "Yes, we really loved the dolphins."

I thought, "O.K., I get it about the dolphins." But what struck me as significant about this exchange came next: The Dad in the family repeated that he believed he understood Americans quite well. But –

"Why," he asked, "are Americans so patriotic?" He said he couldn't really understand that part of our culture.

Americans, he began lecturing me, are so strict these days about preventing people from entering the country. It's such a head-ache filling out all those forms in order to come to Florida. Your government wants to know everything, even about my parents and grandparents. And how about those long lines at your passport control?

Most importantly, why do you always feel that you need to have your flags flying everywhere? All of your schools have them, your government buildings, sports arenas, even your homes. I don't understand it. And you Americans are always singing your national anthem. . . at sporting events, speeches, in your schools, you name it. Everywhere you go, one hears it. And why do you always have to say, "God bless America. . . God bless America." It's crazy!

My frank and friendly interlocutor continued by saying that, although he was born in Germany and lived in Hamburg, he really didn't consider himself a *German*, but more as a *European*, perhaps even a "citizen of the world." Again, yes, he knows America well, but he just can't fathom all of that patriotism . . . all that "God bless America" stuff.

Before changing the subject, I thought to myself, "Nope, you probably never will."

* * * * *

My wife and I returned to the Washington, D.C., area a few days before the Victory in Europe commemorations began. On Friday, 8 May 2015, on the way back from our three-year-old grandson's preschool musical program in Warrenton, Virginia, we decided drop by the Manassas Airport to see several vintage WWII bombers take off – a B-24, a B-29, and two B-17s – and we watched the aircraft join up with the formation from other airports in the area and head toward downtown Washington, D.C.

During this solemn weekend, we also visited Arlington National Cemetery to lay some flowers on the grave of my wife's mom and dad (her mom served in a munitions factory during WWII; and my wife's father died upon returning home from Vietnam in 1967).

I also got up early one morning to hang my American flag out on our front porch.

As I placed the flag in its holder, I took a few moments to think about some of the extraordinary stories that I heard this past April of the Fives – those about the veterans of the 69th Infantry Division, who had linked up with the Soviets along the Elbe.

I imagined Chet throwing around a baseball in camp during a lull in the fighting, and his boyish surprise upon learning that his division had linked up with the Soviets . . . and then his sudden realization that he might be heading back home to Long Island before he knew it.

I imagined Tom's dad and Ted's dad wondering when the Soviets might quit lobbing mortar shells at them . . . and whether seeing the makeshift Stars and Stripes on the castle wall would indeed make them stop.

I imagined a wide grin forming on the face of Nancy's father, as he observed that green flare accelerate into the sky over the hamlet of Strehla . . . saw it hang in midair for a brief moment, then watched it drift down to the surface of the Elbe like a colorful melting snowflake.

And I thought I saw the wheels turning inside the head of Chaim Thau (Jeff's dad), as he leaned over that demolished bridge near Torgau to shake the hand of the first American GI that he had ever met – and wondered, "Hmm. . . How do I become *you*?"

I also thought of Joachim Wesner, the 11-year-old German soldier, who was killed in combat on the last day of the fighting in the Torgau area; and I began to see why Joe Polowsky fought, with every fiber of his being after the meeting on the Elbe, to end all wars.

I imagined my mom shooting rivets into the tail section of one of the B-17s that I had seen taking off from Manassas Airport. And I could see my uncle Claud, vigorously jumping up and down and waving his arms vigorously, trying to convince those Japanese civilians on Okinawa not to be fearful of Americans – not to jump off of those cliffs.

Then, I thought of my dad, who – probably because of his own wartime trials – waited fearfully for my return home from my brief combat experience in Vietnam. I felt the love of the hug that he gave me on the day of our reunion; and I felt the blow when I received the news the next morning that he had suddenly passed on. That was 40 years ago, this month.

Lastly, I recalled the self-styled "non-German" German on the train ride to Prague, the hockey fan who had come to Florida *to ride the dolphins* with his family and thought that he knew Americans quite well, although he couldn't fathom the patriotism part.

I thought to myself: yes, my friend — you're right! I really don't need to say out loud "God Bless America,"

. . . because I know — deep down in my heart — that He already has.

Photo Album

By clicking on this link — Elbe Day 2015 — you will be taken to a Google photo album featuring a presentation on the 70th Anniversary of the historic link-up between U.S. and Soviet forces in eastern Germany in April 1945. Suzanne and I journeyed to Torgau in beautiful Saxony in April 2015 to participate in this solemn commemoration. The photo of veteran "Chet" Yastrzemski and his Russian counterpart located at the top of this blog page was featured in New York City papers several days after the event.

"Official Photo" of the link-up -- staged for the press on 26 April 1945, the day after the first patrols actually made contact along the Elbe. TAKE NOTE of the Soviet soldier ...

Jeff Thau, Colonel, USAF (Ret.), seen here with his wife Rina and Chet. It was Jeff's father Chaim who was the young Soviet in the middle of the "official photo." See the accompanying essay for the details of Chaim Thau's extraordinary life.